

Chapter Three: Identification of Students Experiencing Homelessness



As the first of the homeless liaison responsibilities outlined in the McKinney-Vento Act, identification of students in homeless situations is one of the core duties for a liaison and one that is likely to require a significant amount of the liaison's time. Identifying all students experiencing homelessness is critical as it allows liaisons to help students who may have difficulty with enrollment, allows liaisons to connect students to educational support and community services, and increases the likelihood that homeless students will overcome the extra educational challenges they face.

Section 3.1 The Definition of Homelessness

The McKinney-Vento Education for Homeless Children and Youth Act provides a definition of homeless children and youth to be used by state and local educational agencies (LEAs) in 42 U.S.C. § 11434(a)(2). It defines homeless children and youth to be those who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. Under the larger umbrella of lacking a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, the law also provides several examples of situations that meet the definition. The examples include children and youth

- sharing housing due to a loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason;
- living in hotels, motels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to a lack of alternative, adequate housing;
- abandoned in hospitals;
- awaiting foster care placement;
- living in a public or private place not designated for, or normally used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings;
- living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar places;
- living in one of the above circumstances and who are migratory according to the definition in Section 1309 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965.

When considering if a student meets the criteria in the definition provided by the law, it is important to remember that the list provided is a guide and more situations may exist that meet the criteria than are actually listed. However, liaisons must always rely on the criteria outlined in the law of lacking fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence as the ultimate test of whether a student's housing meets the definition. For more on the specific nuances related to eligibility criteria for students, see Chapter 4 Determining Eligibility.

Section 3.2 The Role of the Liaison in Identifying Homeless Students

While it is true that local liaisons themselves will and should identify many of the homeless students in a LEA, the actual charge in the law is for local liaisons to ensure that homeless students are identified “by school personnel and through coordination activities with other entities and agencies” [42 U.S.C. § 1143(g)(6)(A)(i)]. The language in the law means two important things. First, local liaisons are not expected to go it alone and bear the sole responsibility for identifying students. Second, collaboration with other educational programs and even agencies outside the LEA is not only encouraged, but it is expected. The collaborations involved in ensuring students in homeless situations are identified may be very informal or be structured around formal activities and relationships.

Section 3.2.1 Collaboration Within the School District

Schools are as much a social environment as they are a place for learning. Since students and staff spend a large amount of time together, they often learn a good deal about each other. This kind of environment lends itself to many informal opportunities to identify homeless students. For example, a school counselor may identify a student who is homeless after she notices that a student is asking friends to help cover the lunch fee each day. On the other hand, the relaxed environment of the lunchroom can lead to students making comments that are overheard by the lunchroom staff and cause them to notice that perhaps the student is homeless. Essays written by students which reveal the nature of the students' living arrangements can leave teachers wondering what they can do to help homeless students as well. In each of these instances, the liaison can maximize his ability to identify students that qualify as homeless by establishing relationships with the other

school staff. The key in these instances and many others like them is to make sure staff members are aware of the role and identity of the liaison so that they may refer students as situations raise red flags. By providing staff groups within the school district with basic information about the liaison's role and the definition of homelessness, liaisons will achieve greater success with their objective of identifying students in need. (For more information on general collaboration requirements for services provided by the school district, see Section 15 Managing the Work.)

School staff who may be particularly helpful in meeting the requirement to identify homeless students include

- school nurses;
- front office and registration staff;
- truancy and attendance officers;
- cafeteria staff;
- bus drivers;
- school social workers and counselors;
- classroom teachers and aides; and
- administrators, such as principals or directors of special education and Title I.

While informal collaborations within the district are critical, federal education law also includes requirements for more formal collaborations that can increase homeless student identification. For example, in addition to the requirement in the McKinney-Vento Act that liaisons ensure the identification of students by school personnel, Title I, Part A, also includes requirements for collaboration, as does the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Title I, Part A requires that programs operated under its authority coordinate at the state and local levels. All districts must also have an application approved by the SEA that addresses Title I, Part A coordination with McKinney-Vento. Child Find requirements that have been in place since 1999 were updated in 2004 when the IDEA was reauthorized. They now include a specific requirement that states ensure homeless children with disabilities are identified, located, and evaluated [20 U.S.C. § 1412(a)(3)(A)]. By including language in the McKinney-Vento Act regarding required collaborations, as well as in the federal laws governing other educational and related programs, the responsibility for ensuring collaborations on behalf of homeless students is shared by all the programs involved.

Section 3.2.2 Collaboration With Other Entities and Agencies

In addition to the responsibility of the liaison to work with other school personnel to identify homeless students, the McKinney-Vento Act also requires liaisons to work with other entities and agencies to identify students without fixed, regular, and adequate housing [42 U.S.C. § 1143(g)(6)(A)(i)]. By requiring collaboration with entities external to the school district, the law actually reduces the burden on LEAs and liaisons by providing them with an avenue for assistance. For example, many younger children and their parents or guardians temporarily stay at homeless shelters and are therefore easier to identify for services. Head Start programs are specifically charged with serving the students most in need, which makes them a logical partner for identifying both those students in preschool and their older siblings experiencing homelessness, who would benefit from educational services through the LEA. Communities that receive shelter funding through the Department of Housing and Urban Development also operate what is known as a Continuum of Care (CoC), which represents all stakeholders invested in serving persons experiencing homelessness. The CoC may include shelter providers, food banks, faith-based organizations, and other agencies, making it easy for a liaison to connect with a large number of organizations through one CoC.

While the law is not very specific about the types of activities that should be undertaken to ensure homeless students are identified, it does have one required activity to increase identification: that public notice about the rights of homeless children and youth is disseminated where families are likely to receive services [42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(6)(v)]. Schools, family shelters, and soup kitchens are all examples of locations where a notice of rights must be posted by the liaison. While not an exhaustive list, other places and organizations with which liaisons may want to work to post a statement of rights include

- youth organizations,
- transitional living program sites,
- day or community centers,
- Community Action Agencies,
- welfare and housing offices,
- Workforce One offices,
- homeless coalitions,
- free or low cost health clinics,

- low cost motels,
- storage facilities,
- check cashing businesses,
- laundromats, and
- public libraries.

Section 3.2.3 Strategies to Increase Identification

A variety of strategies exist to increase the identification of students who lack fixed, regular, and adequate housing. Many can be incorporated into other existing activities, reducing the amount of time and cost needed by the LEA to conduct them.

Residency questionnaires

Including a residency questionnaire with a simple statement of rights in the general enrollment and registration packet received by all students as they sign up for school is a good way to ensure the entire student population is informed. By providing the information in all the enrollment packets, no one feels singled out or stigmatized, but even those who are not homeless become more aware of things happening in the community. See Appendix 3.A Sample Residency Information Form.

Enrollment forms for programs serving at-risk students

By reviewing the forms for other educational programs, such as the school meals, Title I, or 21st Century Community Learning Centers programs, liaisons can quickly identify students who may qualify as homeless. Cooperative agreements with early childhood programs like Head Start can also lead to questions on enrollment or intake forms that result in referrals to the liaison when a homeless child is identified.

Quick reference lists

Keeping a list of local low-cost motels or shelters discretely located on the desk of enrollment staff for easy reference can help the staff recognize addresses that may indicate homelessness when students enroll.

Cooperative enrollment events

Events like Kindergarten Round-up or Head Start enrollment fairs can lead to more identified students. Many communities also host events referred to as Homeless Connect which focus on connecting persons in

need with agencies and organizations that can help them, including schools.

Awareness trainings

Strategies for raising the awareness of school staff and community members can include brief updates during regular staff meetings or more intensive workshops that target specific goals related to homelessness and educational outcomes.

Relationship building

By making personal contact with managers at low-cost hotels, social service agencies, local law enforcement, and other public service agencies, liaisons can increase the number of people on the lookout for students in need.

District website

The LEA website often contains the student handbook and other important information targeted to students and their families. It can be a great tool for increasing awareness and disseminating information about the rights of homeless students as well as listing contact information for the liaison.

Attendance hearings

Liaisons may recognize homelessness in students who are under review for attendance problems related to their homelessness which other staff may miss. By either participating in behavior review committees or by training truancy and attendance officers, liaisons will increase the identification of homeless students.

Mailing labels and transportation logs

Checking transportation or address logs may be a good way to identify students who are doubled-up due to loss of housing as liaisons may notice several families in one location. Likewise, working with the transportation department to identify any unusual transportation changes or requests can also result in the identification of homeless students.

Section 3.2.4 Special Populations

The McKinney-Vento Act requires that special attention be given to those homeless children and youth who are not already attending school [42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(7)(c)]. This could include preschool students, students who have dropped out or failed to enroll, or unaccompanied homeless youth. Several tips have already been mentioned regarding early childhood or general enrollment, but liaisons should also take steps to identify those students who are deemed unaccompanied homeless youth. Unaccompanied youth are those not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian [42 U.S.C. § 11434(a)(6)]. Strategies that may be useful in reaching unaccompanied homeless youth are listed below.

Involving youth

Students who may be too embarrassed to ask for assistance or otherwise trust an adult may be willing to reach out to a liaison if other youth are involved or inform them of their rights.

Surveying youth

Youth may become estranged from their families after enrolling in school; a mid-year youth survey could help identify those students not otherwise identified through enrollment questionnaires. Liaisons may also be able to work with their health services offices to include this information as a part of the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRSB), a national, school-based survey to evaluate adolescent behaviors that harm health and well-being.

Targeting outreach

Notices regarding the rights of youth experiencing homelessness should be posted in places where youth may see them and be written in a youth friendly format. Working with street outreach teams for youth can also be a good way to reach youth.

Incorporating the topic

The topic of homelessness can be incorporated into the school curriculum or school convocations. This not only reaches youth who are homeless but also housed youth with homeless friends who may be willing to help connect them to liaisons. For example, students could be assigned a current events project in their civics course on the topic of homelessness.

Section 3.2.5 Useful Links

Issue Brief: *Identifying Students in Homeless Situations*
<http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/briefs/identification.pdf>

Issue Brief: *Who is Homeless?*
http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/briefs/who_is_homeless.pdf

Section 3.2.6 Resources and Tools for Chapter Three

Appendix 3.A Sample Residency Information Form